

Assimilation as the Norm

In a culturally diverse world, a closely guarded and strong identity keeps society's greedy roots from growing strong enough to uproot its own. Zadie Smith's novel, *White Teeth*, illustrates the idiosyncrasies that immigrants and racial couples experience with their identities because they live thousands of miles away from their homelands. The Jones and the Iqbal families illustrate through their interactions the hardships that immigrants face when their culture falls in the minority. Away from their homelands, the Iqbals and the Jones's (on Clara's Jamaican side) are forced to be the sole representation of their culture for their children. Samad Iqbal and Clara Jones drift away from their heritage, leaving their children with bad role models of their culture. With nearly every race and religion represented in their London borough, the two families' children absorb information from their culturally diverse surroundings rather than their parents' hypocritical teachings. Magid assimilates successfully while others like Irie and Millat are rejected by English culture. The generation that Smith depicts in *White Teeth* drifts away from their cultural roots and becomes something else entirely, creating a new breed. Smith often uses comedic situations to criticize the limitations of an exclusive multicultural London.

The past more often than not shapes the future, which happens to be an underlying theme in *White Teeth*. At the very beginning of the novel, Smith quotes, "What is past is prologue," displaying the importance that she intends the past to have on her novel. The loss of identity displayed in the Iqbal and Jones families starts with the parents and trickles down to their unsuspecting children. The past (i.e. the parents) must be examined before all else.

The Iqbal family, or more accurately, Samad, treasures the Iqbal history with its roots deeply embedded in Bangladesh. Even though Samad values purity, especially within his family, he breaks the quickest when it comes to assimilation. In England, Samad stands no

chance of keeping his morals straight and he eventually breaks, assimilating despite the fact that he views assimilation as corruption (Smith 159). His wife, Alsana, understands that they are not pure, that even as Bengalis they are defined as “Indo-Aryans,” going on to say that “It is still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe” (Smith 196). Samad remains rooted in his belief that England corrupts and taints Muslims and even though he struggles with his identity in London, he becomes the ‘bestower’ of guilt, when it comes to the Iqbal purity. His guilty conscience, brought on by an act of adultery, fuels his need to ground his children in the Muslim faith. Samad finds himself grasping for a solution to save his children: “The further Samad himself floated out to sea...the more determined he became to create for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace” (Smith 161-162). Samad’s Muslim identity withers away, his purity as pale and dead as his right hand. His way of thinking and being begins to change as he takes on another culture’s beliefs and values. Samad begins to make deals with Allah, saying that he will give up his sinful habit of masturbation if he can start drinking alcohol. The compromises Samad tries to make with Allah show him slowly assimilating into western culture. Samad justifies his sins through compromises, but when he begins to have sexual feelings for the twins’ music teacher, Samad willingly gives himself over to pleasure rather than his faith. When Samad commits adultery by kissing a woman other than his wife, he kicks the stool underneath him, “like a man hanging himself” (Smith 133); showing that Samad knows he has rebuked his religion. Out of guilt, Samad sends Magid to his homeland in Bangladesh so that one of his children will be a true and pure Muslim. The two boys separated at age nine come to represent the two sides of Samad that once warred within him; Magid assimilates into English culture, while Millat outwardly becomes an Islamic extremist.

Samad has much more in common with his “bad” son, Millat, than he realizes; they both struggle with their identity as it pertains to their religion and ultimately make compromises so they can sleep at night. Millat represents the part of Samad that outwardly revolts the English culture while assimilating quietly. Millat had never been a ‘pure’ Muslim, even as a nine year old when his music teacher asks (looking for a stereotypical answer) what

music Millat listens to at home, Millat states that he favors Michael Jackson, rather than a musician from his own culture. Millat exhibits signs of assimilation as a child but must have realized that assimilation was not possible for him:

[Millat's] Englishness is refused because the English do not recognize themselves in him. In this refusal he is driven to a revolutionary Islam that burns out Englishness and the ways it seeks to confine and discipline his body. (Bantum 666)

Millat joins an extremist group with the unfortunate acronym of KEVIN, but he finds that even so, he cannot escape the English influence. However, Millat comes to make his own peace with this because he sees that his father struggles with his faith, justifying his own impurity: "[Samad] prays five times a day but he still drinks and he doesn't have any Muslim friends," (Smith 277). Millat cannot rid himself of the English influence that has embedded itself in him. Even Millat's act of joining KEVIN is influenced by his impure desire to be a gangster like Al Pacino. Millat gives up everything that KEVIN tells him to, but he cannot give up his "most shameful secret" that he thinks of the opening line from *Goodfellas* every time he opens a door (Smith 368). Millat ends up exactly like his father; they are stuck between two cultures and cannot extricate their roots from the impeding English culture.

Magid represents the other side of the cultural coin: where Millat cannot assimilate to English culture, Magid does so with ease. Magid excels during his short-lived allowance in London because he can assimilate even at the young age of nine. Samad overlooks the time that Magid had English friends knocking at the door, looking for one "Mark Smith," and still sees Magid as the good son or, more importantly, his last hope. Samad chooses his "good son," Magid, to send back home to get a cultural education, effectively providing himself with the short lived peace of mind that one of his children would be pure. Samad projects all of his ideals and wishes of Muslim purity into Magid while he resides in Bangladesh. Samad preserves his idea of a pure and untainted son in the picture of Magid and a goat; a small frame of time when Magid shows signs of learning and accepting his roots in Bangladesh.

In the moment that the camera superimposes the ideal Magid onto film, Magid expeditiously moves on to seek out the English influence. Magid clings to any English influence that he can find in Bangladesh, eventually relating and learning the most from an Indian writer that Samad describes as an “English licker-of-behinds” (Smith 239). Magid eventually gains a pen-pal, and a second twin out of Marcus Chalfen, a prominent scientist. Marcus pays for Magid’s travel back to England, where Marcus recognizes himself in Magid, as though they are two sides of an equation (Smith 350). Magid becomes, “A follower of the British ways. He is a disciple and thus a testament to the possibilities of the colonial project” (Bantum 666). Even though Magid chooses a path other than his roots and identity dictate, he still respects his heritage. One author, Matt Thomas, sees “Magid as spiritually pure, a savior who is accepting of all views” (23), because Magid never says anything negative about other cultures. In this way, Magid represents the assimilative side of Samad but Magid does so successfully and willingly, with some improvements.

The Jones family represents the opposite of the Iqbal family. The Jones’ family history bears no importance, since Archie himself states that, “I’m a Jones, you see...We’re nobody,” but he goes on to add that his family is, “Good honest English stock” (84), which immediately characterizes Archie as a stereotypical Englishman and delineates where his roots stem from. Whereas Archie’s background contains nothing of importance, his wife Clara’s family history tends toward the exotic side, having roots in the Caribbean –although not all of its leaves are present and accounted for. The lineage of the Bowden’s lay more in mystery than in well-documented parentage. Clara’s mother Hortense, a Caribbean Jehovah’s Witness, values religion over all else. Clara never truly accepts or seeks out her identity; instead she passively accepts her mother’s way of life until a boy comes along who leads her down another path, and then Archie leads her down another. Even as an adult, Clara does not seem interested in her Jamaican roots but rather becomes passive like Archie. Clara’s and Archie’s passiveness and lack of roots leads their interracial daughter Irie to question her place in London.

Smith depicts a London regarded as multicultural; however, the London depicted in the novel does not include Irie into their multicultural fold. Irie slips through the cracks

since she has white and black heritage in her blood. Since her background is not homogeneous, Irie has multiple identities which label her as different. Although many cultures are represented in London, it displays “A type of quiet segregation in multicultural London where racism is an open secret” (Thomas 23). Therefore, Irie, a product of a white Englishman and a black Caribbean woman, sticks out since she represents a mixing of cultures; she is a unique breed. Irie does not celebrate the differences that make her stand out: “Irie didn’t know that she was fine. There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land” (Smith 222). Irie clearly sees her uniqueness as negative since she does not think that she belongs in the “strange land” that makes up London.

Irie begins to see a reflection when her teacher, Mrs. Roody, has the class read out Sonnet 127, but her teacher rips away any hope that Irie has of finding a reflection (Smith 226-227). The sonnet reads out that a man loves a woman that has black eyes, black hair, and dark skin. Irie instantly sees this woman as black like herself, but Mrs. Roody quickly shoots her down: “No, dear, she’s *dark*. She’s not black in the modern sense. There weren’t any...well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear.” This destroys Irie’s confidence, forcing her to feel shameful of her mixed history. The teacher, of course, bears no ill will towards Irie, but seeks only to teach about not interpreting history with “A modern ear” (Smith 227). Nonetheless, Irie comes away from the class feeling that she should change herself to become more like everyone else.

The Chalfen family comes into the picture when Irie and Millat are found smoking weed on school grounds. The school gives the Chalfen family the opportunity to experiment with reformation rather than punishment by helping Irie and Millat get back on the right track at school. The Chalfen family represents “[An] exaggerated version of exclusive cultures that view all other ways of life as inferior” (Thomas 18). Mother Chalfen, Joyce, takes on Irie and Millat as projects, much like she does with her garden. Joyce’s garden represents the world as she sees it, unable to thrive without her constant pruning and care. Joyce takes on the project of helping Irie and Millat like she would with one of her plants because “She sees them as being eaten from the inside out by their cultural heritage just as

thrips (a bug that nests within certain plants) do to gardens” (Thomas 19). Joyce has a fierce “need to be needed” and so she takes it upon herself to help the two children by trying to assimilate them into her “superior” Chalfen culture. Irie instantly becomes fascinated in the Chalfen way, seeing them as superior to her own family since they work so well together and have no questions about their past. Irie takes on the task of assimilation so she might become like the Chalfen family and rid herself of her complicated and entangled roots. Millat, on the other hand, sees Joyce’s efforts for what they are, as an effort to reduce the meaning of his cultural background; assimilation as corruption, thinking that mirrors his father’s view.

Marcus Chalfen heads the FutureMouse project that involves genetically modifying mice. The FutureMouse project sparks controversy around the idea of changing what God (or Allah) has ordained. The mouse that gets unveiled at the Perret Institute is genetically encoded to have cancer and die within a month of a pre-determined time. Part of the controversy surrounding the FutureMouse project pertains to the fact that Marcus desires to patent his unique mouse because “Its genetic code is *new*. New breed” (Smith 283). The mouse’s uniqueness within its realm is reminiscent of Irie and her odd mixing of ethnicities. The mouse further symbolizes Irie because it essentially escapes its Marcus-ordained fate of being ogled by passersby in the Perret Institute while Irie escapes her complicated roots by starting over. Ultimately, Irie goes to the Caribbean where her roots began so that she can start afresh with her daughter. Irie creates for her child an escape that is “Free of paternal strings” (Smith 448), which allows her child the freedom to choose her own identity away from the complicated multicultural society that Irie was born into.

The English culture the three children live in ultimately persuades them to accept identities that do not line up with their heritage. All three of them were born in a multicultural London which does not accurately portray what it means to be a Muslim or a Caribbean. London instead represents the limits of multiculturalism: “Identities are caught within the complicated claim of what is Englishness and, by implication, what it means to be a citizen of the British Empire” (Bantum 668). Irie ultimately sheds her roots in search of a “blank space” that the London she was born in could never have. The multicultural London

the children were born into requires one culture, like the English, to have influence or dominance over the minority cultures. The two parents, Samad and Clara, glean many of their habits from the English, leaving their children with assimilation or erasure of the past as the viable and easy option to approaching identity. Irie, Magid, and Millat each have complicated lives that are deeply rooted in their homelands; they each assimilate or desire the English to accept them, to simplify them so they might be normal. Zadie Smith's depiction of London explicates the limits of multiculturalism through the assimilation each child undergoes.

Works Cited

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